

Jan 28, 2005 -Rep. Slaughter Calls on Bush Administration to Come Clean on Payments to Journalists

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Pressure builds as more journalists come forward after taking money from White House to stump for Administration proposals.

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, Ranking Member of the House Committee on Rules, sent a letter to the White House today calling on them to set the record straight when it comes to the payment of journalists in exchange for their support of Bush Administration policies.

"From the looks of it, Armstrong Williams was only the tip of the ice-berg. The American people deserve a full account of how their tax dollars were used by the White House to pay members of the press to advocate sympathetic positions on Administration proposals," said Rep. Slaughter.

In the weeks following revelations that Armstrong Williams was paid \$240,000 by the White House to support their so-called 'No Child Left Behind' program, two additional members of the media have been identified as taking money from the Bush Administration without properly identifying the transaction in their reporting.

"We cannot allow the names of new journalists who took money from the White House to trickle out; one by one, day in and day out. We need to break the damn of silence at the White House and let the truth pour out for a complete investigation. The American people deserve nothing less. They must have confidence that the media is reporting the truth without bias," stated Rep. Slaughter.

The letter signed by Rep. Slaughter was also signed by other members of the Democratic Leadership in hopes that this emerging scandal can be resolved once and for all.

"There is a great deal of work to be done here in Congress. Many issues deserve our attention. We need to resolve this issue so we can move forward with the work of our constituents," continued Rep. Slaughter.

The text of the letter follows:

January 28, 2005

The President

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to request that you direct each department and agency of the Executive Branch to disclose to the appropriate Committee of the House of Representatives all public relations and advertising contracts signed during your Administration.

Over the past year, multiple investigations have revealed that federal agencies have employed secret publicity campaigns to promote Administration priorities.

- In separate analyses, the Government Accountability Office found that the Department of Health and Human Services and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy violated the congressional prohibition on publicity and propaganda by distributing fabricated video news reports.[1]

- An investigative report by USA Today revealed that the Department of Education paid a conservative commentator to support the No Child Left Behind Act in television and radio appearances.[2]

- Earlier this week, the Washington Post reported the Department of Health and Human Services had a contract with a syndicated columnist who promoted the President's marriage initiative.[3]

- A newly released congressional report found that public relations spending has more than doubled during the Bush Administration.[4]

- And today, USA Today, the Los Angeles Times, and Salon.com reported that the Department of Health and Human Services paid another conservative commentator thousands of dollars to support the marriage initiative, including by speaking about the importance of marriage to churches and community organizations.[5]

These developments raise serious concerns. The covert propaganda campaigns disclosed to date used tax dollars to mislead the American people about public policy and deceive the news media and press about the credibility of critiques of Administration policies. These covert propaganda campaigns are unethical and illegal. We very much hope the contracts revealed to this point are an aberration and not part of a pattern across federal agencies.

To assist us in understanding the scope of public relations and propaganda contracted for by the Department, we request that you provide to the Democratic Leader, and to the appropriate Committee of jurisdiction, the following:

- (1) All contracts executed during the Bush Administration with public relations firms, advertising agencies, public opinion research firms, media organizations, and individual members of the media, including any modifications of such contracts.

- (2) All subcontracts executed under the contracts identified under (1), including any modifications of such subcontracts.

- (3) Any documents or communications that describe or assess the work performed under these contracts and subcontracts.

- (4) A copy of the justification and approval documents for any of these contracts entered into using less than full and open competition.

The possibility of a widespread practice of covert propaganda raises the most serious of concerns. The Congress, the press, and the American people all deserve a full disclosure of the Administration's policy on such propaganda.

It has already been nearly one month since the Democratic Leader and Ranking Members Henry Waxman, George Miller, David Obey, and Elijah Cummings wrote to you requesting full disclosure of these contracts.[6] To date, we have received no reply to that inquiry. Now that there have been additional revelations, we would appreciate your cooperation with this inquiry, and would appreciate a complete response by March 1, 2005.

Sincerely,

/ Rep. Louise M. Slaughter

[1] U.S. Government Accountability Office, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services - Video News Releases (May 19, 2004) (GAO/B-302710). U.S. Government Accountability Office, Office of National Drug Control Policy - Video News Release (Jan. 4, 2005) (GAO/B-303495).

[2] White House Paid Commentator to Promote Law, USA Today, (Jan. 7, 2005).

[3] Writer Backing Bush Plan had Gotten Federal Contract, Washington Post (Jan. 25, 2005).

[4] House Committee on Government Reform, Federal Public Relations Spending, (January 26, 2005).

[5] HHS says it paid columnist for help, USA Today, (January 28, 2005); Federal Contracts With Columnists Prompt Change in Policy, Los Angeles Times, (January 28, 2005); Third columnist caught with hand in the Bush till, Salon.com, (January 27, 2005).

[6] Letter from House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi et al. to the President (Jan. 7, 2005).